

# Newsweek

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NEEMA-REUTER

Tripoli after American bombing: *Can the truth get its boots on?*

## NEWS MEDIA

# Skiping Through the News

The press has a short attention span

**A** lie gets halfway around the world," Winston Churchill liked to say, "before the truth puts on its boots." Churchill never had the privilege of meeting one Joey Skaggs, a Greenwich Village "media hoax artist," but the two would have seen eye to eye. Skaggs's *schtick* is to plant phony stories—bordellos for dogs, sperm banks for rock stars—and see how far they spread. He is never disappointed. In last month's "Fat Squad" caper—a new diet in which strongmen would physically restrain people from food—Skaggs, using the name Joe Bones, appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America." Host David Hartman evidently forgot that a year earlier he had interviewed Skaggs, then using his real name, about his aquatic sculptures: "condominiums for fish." Last week, long after the Fat Squad hoax was exposed, Skaggs was still receiving credulous inquiries from reporters worldwide.

Serious news, too, is often treated with the gullibility and lack of follow-through that allows a prankster to thrive. Several striking examples emerged from the recent nuclear-plant disaster at Chernobyl. In the Soviet Union, where the truth doesn't even *own* boots, firsthand reporting was impossible. The resulting anger of Western reporters—combined with competitive pressures to come up with *something*—led to vastly inflated casualty-figure assumptions, which some news organizations then did too little to correct. United Press International didn't retract its estimate of 2,000

dead until May 22—nearly a month after the explosion. In the same vein, the early impression, conveyed largely by supporters of the American nuclear-power industry, was that the Chernobyl plant lacked safety features found in all U.S. plants. That turned out to be false, but by the time a truer picture was established—at least three weeks after the explosion—the networks barely mentioned it at all.

**Half life:** The Chernobyl example is particularly striking when you consider that it had a *longer* half life than most stories. Usually the evaporation takes place almost instantly. "It's as if there is an inflatable map of the world," says author David Halberstam. "One month the Falklands is the biggest thing on the map, then it's a flyspeck again." Whatever happened to Poland? Or the artificial heart? Much of this spasmodic quality is due to television. With some exceptions, TV lacks any equivalent to the inside pages of a paper. That means that when a story fades, it fades almost entirely, and the media's saturation coverage skips on to the next event, often passing over whatever new details that may fundamentally change the "old" stories.

Administrations have long exploited this press trait. In the first crucial days after the April 14 bombing of Libya, the "irrefutable evidence" of Libyan involvement in terrorism in West Berlin was widely accepted on the word of the president and his advisers; few, if any, reporters in-

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formed their readers and viewers that no one outside the government had actually seen the intercepted cables on which the classified evidence was based. By and large, the assignment of blame to Libya was complete well before Syria's apparently extensive role was identified and reported. Similarly, in the first days after the raid, the vast bulk of the media accepted uncritically the Pentagon's assertion that it was necessary to fly F-111s all the way from England to take part in the raid. Only much later was it pointed out that the inability of two multibillion-dollar aircraft carriers to handle such a minor military mission by themselves raised serious questions about American military strategy.

On one level, the problems are unavoidable. Time and space are limited, other news legitimately competes for attention, deadlines loom. And the conventions of daily journalism make it hard to contradict the government without attribution to a prominent source, most of whom have less information than the administration. "You have to give officialdom its say," says Charles Mohr of The New York Times. Still, stenography is not enough. Mohr believes that essential journalistic skepticism is at its lowest ebb in years: "After Vietnam and Watergate there was an over-reaction of suspicion and antagonism. Now things have swung back the other way. There's almost a slight cheerleading quality lately." A conformist "news climate" resistant to contrary views now develops during many major events, as if the Bay of Pigs invasion or the Gulf of Tonkin incident had never taken place.

**Warmed over:** But most of the time the pattern isn't as coherent as that. Distortions often get a head start on truths through a peculiar combination of laziness and hype. The "liability crisis" was for many months reported as a product of a litigation explosion. That sounded right but was superficial. A more careful look is now revealing that the insurance industry, anxious to raise its rates, is not above exploiting warmed-over horror stories and an (often incorrect) perception in the press that damage awards are often huge.

Similarly, in 1983 and 1984, "missing children" was one of the biggest stories in the country. Now it turns out that most of the statistics tossed around in countless stories about missing children were phony—added up wrong, then cribbed by reporter after reporter. There is no crisis: 99 percent of the children were not abducted by strangers. They are generally either runaways—most of whom quickly return home—or victims of custody fights. The story was hyped because it had the requisite combination of socio-pathology and pathos. Even when The Denver Post won a Pulitzer Prize recently for puncturing the myth, few news organizations went

back and corrected earlier impressions.

Most distortions have less to do with correcting mistakes than with simple follow-up and context. Recall last year's "cancer breakthrough." Medical writers who gathered at Columbia University this spring felt the story was overplayed. Whatever the careful intentions—NEWSWEEK's cover, for example, billed it as a "search" for a cancer cure—many readers and viewers confused promising research with immediate results. Perhaps inevitably, abbreviated or sometimes simplistic accounts of the "breakthrough" made it halfway around the world—spurring thousands of calls from desperate patients without a prayer of getting the featured treatment—before the far more preliminary nature of the story even got out of bed. Joey Skaggs never would have invented something like that as a hoax. It's not funny.

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